

Spending Review Unattributed Note

Virtual Event, 9:45-11:30, Friday 24th September 2021

Intro to Roundtable

CaSE welcomed attendees and highlighted the strengths of these meetings - an opportunity to have open and honest discussions on the future Strategy for UKRI and the UK science landscape, and how we can work together to create a strong case for investment and innovation.

There were two parts to the meeting: making the collective case for research and innovation and how UKRI can support the sector through its strategy in the short and medium term.

Making a collective case for research and innovation

Challenges and opportunities that were raised by universities included:

The impact of the pandemic

There have been about 30% less bids for funding during the pandemic. In part this is because of the productivity loss to activities needed to adapt to the pandemic (e.g. online teaching, working from home). Recovery measures are critical, those from UKRI have already helped.

On increased public investment

Scaling the R&D workforce to meet the demand of increased investment is essential. A hockey-stick approach to investment has negative impact - putting all the increase in funding near the end of the cycle gives far less benefits (e.g. in leveraging private funding), than if these investments were spread more evenly. The economic case for investment must continue to be made; linking R&D and innovation to government priorities, such as levelling up.

Research sustainability

Maintaining sustainability of the research system is vital - failing to cover the costs will stretch universities too thin.

People and skills

People and skills are critically important throughout research system. Training is important, but this should be built on infrastructure capability. Strong facilities can underpin excellent training - it should not be an OR decision. Emphasis on STEM, particularly from Whitehall, can be limiting. e.g. on Net Zero, understanding the behaviour change required is also critical.

Challenges and opportunities that were raised by industry included:

Industry wants to maintain and enhance pool of talent within the UK. The UK needs to be outward looking with international collaboration via Horizon and other mechanisms. Investment in discovery research in the UK and a growing innovation focus (especially in the NHS), provides an attractive proposition to pharma and healthcare companies. A collaborative approach with industry is very helpful (e.g. life sciences vision), but funding is critical.

The 2.4% is a target based on an OECD average and not enough for a science superpower. Other countries are already pushing for more. The economic downturn has reduced real terms of this funding target.

In summary:

- People and talent are critical as is ensuring there is connectivity between universities and industry.
- Government focus on innovation and private investment is welcomed but must be careful to not lose the strong broad fundamental base. And secondly, strong public investment is needed to drive in private investment now. Wait too long and it will be much harder to pull in private industry.

How can UKRI, through its future strategy and vision, support the sector to drive through the changes needed to reach our collective ambitions for research and innovation in the longer term?

- Make innovation a mainstream activity for academics.
- Often unis have more industry partners and potential projects than they do academics keen to work on these projects.
- Need to put in place the right incentives.
- Community leadership from research institutes like universities is critical. Partnership across multiple agencies, national and local government, local industry etc.
- Many companies do not even think about or have R&D capability. Must improve this.
- Convening and bringing together the sector to challenge is critical.